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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Fairfax Planning Commission has initiated discussions regarding updating the City's Comprehensive Plan, which was adopted in 2004. During the initial stages of these discussions, a series of *Briefing Papers* will be published on matters related to planning. The topics of the papers include:

- ⇒ Comprehensive plan mechanics
- ⇒ Models of development
- ⇒ Land use and zoning
- ⇒ Regional development snapshot
- ⇒ Economic development opportunities and partnerships
- ⇒ Sustainability and the environment
- ⇒ Multimodal transportation
- ⇒ Public facilities and lands
- ⇒ Fiscal Impact Analysis
- ⇒ Census 2010 data update
- ⇒ Parking

The papers are intended to provide information that may be useful as the process to update the Comprehensive Plan moves forward. The papers will explore the aforementioned topics in detail, providing both a local perspective and examples of best practices that may be applicable to the City of Fairfax. In addition, the papers will provide context for the discussion by providing background information and, when applicable, a glossary of terms.

The proposed update to the City of Fairfax Comprehensive Plan is the impetus behind all of the *Briefing Papers*, so in this first paper, *Comprehensive Plan Mechanics*, the fundamentals of this document and the process to create it are examined. A comprehensive plan is a fairly common policy document for local governments around the country, serving as the basis for a range of decision-making activities related to land use and development. Nevertheless, the document itself and the planning process can vary significantly from locality to locality, so this paper covers: the history of comprehensive planning, the legal requirements for comprehensive plans in the State of Virginia, the content of previous plans in the City of Fairfax, and examples of recent planning trends and practices.

INTRODUCTION

The comprehensive plan serves as a locality's primary decision making document for land use and development and an adopted comprehensive plan is a requirement for each jurisdiction in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The history of comprehensive planning in the United States dates back more than eighty years and the City of Fairfax has demonstrated a strong commitment to comprehensive planning over the course of its history. Comprehensive plans should be reviewed regularly (and are required to be by the Code of Virginia) to ensure they reflect the values of the community and adequately address challenges and opportunities in the future. The creation and publication of a comprehensive plan is a process with numerous components, so this paper covers the "mechanics" of that process by reviewing what's required, what has traditionally been included, and what are some of the best practices of today that should be considered for new comprehensive plans.

"The plan shall be made with the general purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the municipality and its environs which will, in accordance with present and future needs, best promote health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and general welfare, as well as efficiency and economy in the process of development..."

Standard City Planning Enabling Act, 1928

a direct relationship between a comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance (the SSZEA stated that zoning "regulations shall be made in accordance with a comprehensive plan").

The Virginia General Assembly adopted the SSZEA in 1926 for cities and towns and by 1938 all counties within the state had zoning enabling authority. The SCPEA was adopted in Virginia in 1934 and 1936. Enabling authority for comprehensive planning in Virginia has been amended over the years, including a mandate in 1980 that all localities have an adopted plan (the next section reviews the Code of Virginia as it pertains to comprehensive planning), but much of what is currently authorized dates back to provisions drafted more than eighty years ago.

BACKGROUND

While visionary and policy-driven as opposed to regulatory in its focus, the comprehensive plan is an extremely important document for local governments. A plan will regularly serve the primary guideline for land use decisions in a jurisdiction for years or even decades. The plan also informs a locality's land use regulations through the zoning ordinance and subdivision ordinance and the construction of public facilities through the Capital Improvement Program.

History

The comprehensive plan is generally viewed as the basis for land use decision-making and municipal capital project planning in the United States. All states throughout the country have planning and zoning enabling legislation and most jurisdictions have implemented some form of local regulations. Most states trace their planning and zoning legislation back to the *Standard State Zoning Enabling Act (SSZEA)* and the *Standard City Planning Enabling Act (SCPEA)*, prepared by the Department of Commerce in 1926 and 1928, respectively.

The SCPEA outlined the scope and purpose of a comprehensive plan and the two acts together formed

Code of Virginia

The Code of Virginia provides the enabling legislation for comprehensive planning in the state. As is noted in the *History* section, while many jurisdictions had plans prior, an adopted comprehensive plan became mandatory for all Virginia localities in 1980. As it was based upon the Standard City Planning Enabling Act, the Code of Virginia contains very similar provisions and language. In response to changing conditions, a number of recommendations or requirements have been added to the legislation over the years.

Prior to stating the items to be included in the plan, the Code of Virginia conveys the responsibility for the plan, the purpose of the plan, the scope of the plan, and the

extent to which the plan applies. The planning commission from the locality is tasked with preparing the plan and recommending it to the governing body. The governing body is responsible for adopting the plan. The two bodies generally remain in close communication throughout the process to draft the plan, so both are familiar with the plan and the issues addressed prior to formal consideration. The purpose of the plan is to guide development and address future needs within the jurisdiction. In order to identify the range of needs, the Code of Virginia requires the locality to conduct analysis of existing conditions and future trends. This is normally accomplished through a range of activities, from demographic and economic data studies to field work and mapping. The plan is intended to be general in its extent, but it is required that the plan identify the “approximate” locations and character of major features. A combination of maps and text are often used to convey this information.

The Code of Virginia includes both required and optional content for comprehensive plans in the state. The required and optional provisions allow localities some flexibility in what is included within an individual plan. The required provisions are related to issues that are fundamental to the plan itself, such as long-range

recommendations for development and methods of implementation. The optional content may be applicable in some jurisdictions while not being relevant to others (for example, agricultural maps).

In order to address what are perceived as critical issues statewide, the Code of Virginia does require that all comprehensive plans address affordable housing and transportation infrastructure. In addition, the Virginia General Assembly in 2007 placed greater emphasis on the connection between land use and transportation by adding a provision for “Urban Development Areas” in comprehensive plans (Code of Virginia Section 15.2-2223.1). Urban Development Areas, which are locations designated for increased residential and commercial density, are required for certain high-growth localities, but are optional for any locality in the state. The Urban Development Areas are intended to accommodate the growth anticipated by the jurisdiction in locations that already have development, are served by utilities, or are in near proximity to transportation facilities. In an effort to support and encourage their designation, the legislation also recommends that federal, state, and local infrastructure funding be directed toward Urban Development Areas.

CODE OF VIRGINIA (SECTION 15.2-2223)

Responsibility. “The local planning commission shall prepare and recommend a comprehensive plan for the physical development of the territory within its jurisdiction and every governing body shall adopt a comprehensive plan for the territory under its jurisdiction.”

Purpose. “The comprehensive plan shall be made with the purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with present and probable future needs and resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants, including the elderly and persons with disabilities.”

Scope. “In the preparation of a comprehensive plan, the commission shall make careful and comprehensive surveys and studies of the existing conditions and trends of growth, and of the probable future requirements of its territory and inhabitants.”

Extent. “The comprehensive plan shall be general in nature, in that it shall designate the general or approximate location, character, and extent of each feature, including any road improvement and any transportation improvement, shown on the plan and shall indicate where existing lands or facilities are proposed to be extended, widened, removed, relocated, vacated, narrowed, abandoned, or changed in use as the case may be.”

CODE OF VIRGINIA CONTENT
(SECTIONS 15.2-2223 AND 15.2-2224)

Required	Optional
<p>Long-range recommendations for general development and a map of the area</p> <p>Transportation plan that designates a system of transportation infrastructure needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Roadways, bicycle accommodations, pedestrian accommodations, railways, bridges, public transportation facilities, etc. ⇒ Hierarchy of roads ⇒ Road and transportation map that includes the cost estimates of improvements <p>Designation of areas and implementation measures for the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of affordable housing</p> <p>Methods of implementation</p>	<p>Designation of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Areas for various types of development and use ⇒ A system of community service facilities ⇒ Historical areas ⇒ Urban renewal areas ⇒ Areas for the implementation of reasonable groundwater protection measures <p>Capital Improvement program, subdivision ordinance, zoning ordinance and district maps</p> <p>Mineral resources, agricultural, and forestal maps</p> <p>Location of existing or proposed recycling centers</p> <p>Location of military bases and facilities</p> <p>Corridors for electric transmission lines</p>

Legal standing

The Code of Virginia, in Sections 15.2-2223 through 15.2-2236, provides the legal foundation of comprehensive plans and the planning and adoption process within the state. These sections lay out the content of the plan (reviewed in the *Code of Virginia* section of this paper) and the adoption process (reviewed in the *Planning process* section of this paper). In addition, Section 15.2-2232 provides for the review of proposed public facilities for consistency with the plan. Known as *2232 review*, the Code requires that the facility be “substantially in accord with the adopted comprehensive plan,” working within the fundamental concept that the plan will depict “the general or approximate location, character, and extent of each feature.”

The comprehensive plan is a guide for, among other items, the locality’s land use decisions, zoning ordinance text amendments, public facilities planning, and growth management. A comprehensive plan isn’t the only guide

or reference that a locality should consider in relation to these matters, but it is the document upon which the courts have placed significant emphasis. Plans that have been carefully prepared with appropriate studies, are internally consistent, and are grounded in sound planning principles generally avoid claims of decisions being arbitrary or capricious.

The flexibility inherent to a comprehensive plan’s general nature will continue to provide opportunities for debate, but Stephen P. Robin, author of *Zoning & Subdivision Law in Virginia: A Handbook*, suggests that localities consider the following recommendations when developing a plan:

- ⇒ State the plan’s intent as clearly and directly as possible
- ⇒ State the factors to be weighed in making land use decisions
- ⇒ Base the plan on rational study and be realistic in its content

Planning process

It could be argued that the process by which a comprehensive plan is prepared is nearly as important as the document itself. The level of effort that is placed on the research and analysis that informs the plan, as well as the manner in which the community is engaged in the development of the plan, influences the support the plan will ultimately hold with the public, public officials, and even the court system. Comprehensive plans do require amendment from time to time to reflect current conditions, so the planning process is constantly evolving and building upon itself. The document was

even coined the “impermanent constitution” by Professor Charles Haar of Harvard University to reflect the need for the plan to be revised regularly, but also to acknowledge that the validity of the regulations and decision-making that rely on the plan make it truly a representation of a locality’s fundamental tenets.

The specific mechanisms that are used in the planning process can vary greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and even from plan to plan within the same jurisdiction. This is due to the fact that the means by which data is collected and analyzed, issues are prioritized, and strategies are formulated may be particular to the individual circumstance. At one point in time, it may make sense to solicit public input through a town hall meeting, while at another point in time, it may make sense to hold an open house or conduct a charrette. Similarly, in terms of the collection and analysis of data, field work and verification is the best alternative in certain situations, while use of mapping software and desktop analysis tools is the best alternative in other situations.

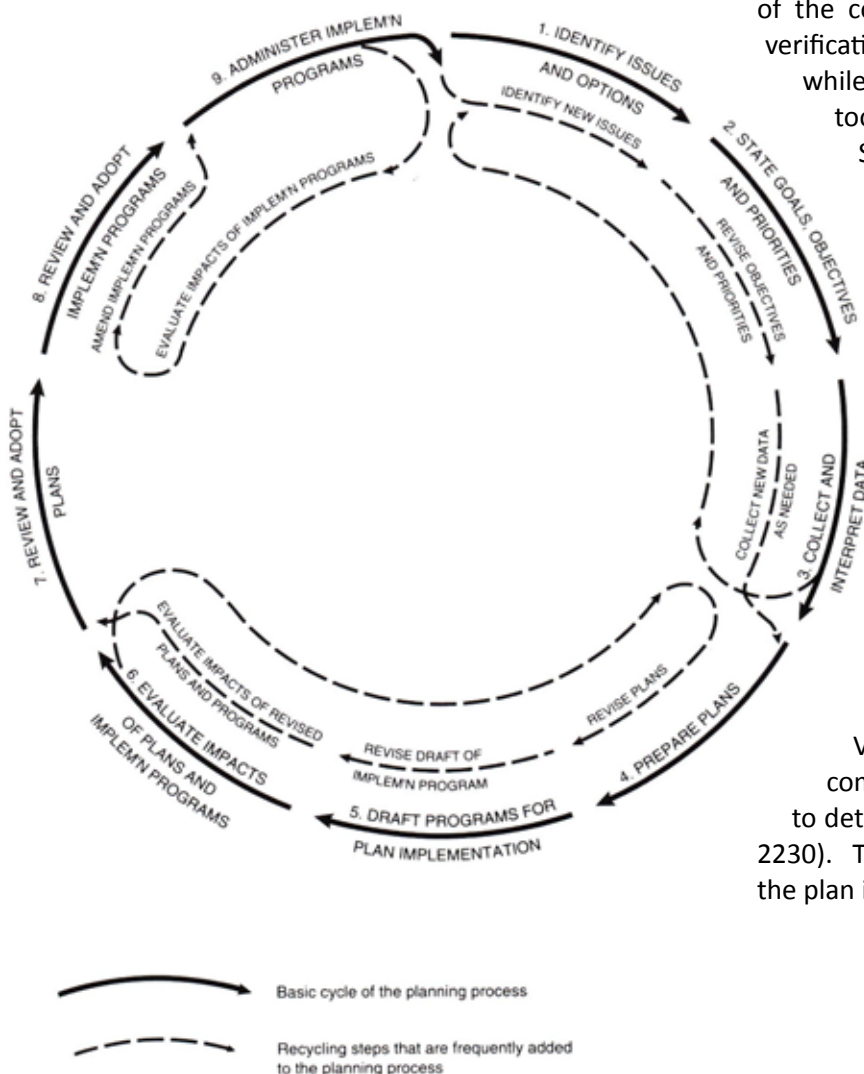
State-of-the-art planning tools and techniques are examined in closer detail in the *Best Practices* section of this paper.

Despite the differences in the particular means that are used, the basic components in the planning process should be the same in all instances. A summary graphic (left) prepared by Larz T. Anderson aptly captures the planning process, as well its ongoing nature.

The comprehensive plan is drafted, implemented, and reviewed through the planning process. Regular updating and amending are typical steps localities take to respond to changing conditions. The Code of Virginia even requires that localities review their comprehensive plans at least once every five years to determine if it is advisable to amend (Section 15.2-2230). The ongoing nature of the process ensures that the plan is useful and relevant.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

— Larz T. Anderson



Contents of the Plan

While the Code of Virginia has certain requirements regarding the content of comprehensive plans in the State of Virginia (see the *Code of Virginia* section of this paper), localities can choose from a wide range of items to include within their individual plans. Most plans contain a number of similar items (land use, transportation, the environment, etc.), but depending on the nature of the jurisdiction itself (largely developed versus largely

undeveloped, environmental constraints, historic resources, etc.) other items included in the plan can vary greatly.

As part of the issue identification step in the process, the jurisdiction will make note of that which needs attention. The range of issues considered in a comprehensive plan may relate to: the natural environment (topography, soils, water resources, etc.), the built environment (land use, architecture, etc.), government (law, organizational structure, etc.), traffic and transportation (roadways, traffic counts, modes of transportation, etc.), social and economic conditions (population characteristics, market conditions, cost of living, etc.), or public services and facilities (parks, schools, public buildings, etc.). Issues are identified through various means, including professional staff analysis, planning commission and governing body discussion, and/or public comment and observation.

The items outlined in the issue identification process are varied, so the plan document helps organize them in a manner that draws the connections between them. There are a number of formats that can be used to organize the issues. Ultimately, the format selected should address and prioritize the issues in support of the vision, goals, objectives, and strategies developed through the planning process.

WHAT A PLAN SHOULD PROVIDE

1. A plan should describe a community. It should identify the community's character.
2. A plan should clearly identify how a community will get from today to tomorrow.
3. A plan should show how the new will fit in with the old.
4. A plan should clearly identify community problems and propose solutions.
5. A plan should identify strategies for maintaining community attributes and strengths.
6. A plan should state how things will work and where they will be physically located.
7. A plan should provide some guidance as to the timing of development and redevelopment.
8. A plan should contain a specific change strategy.
9. A plan should be developed with strong public input.
10. A plan should be consequential and capable of making a community difference.

*Dr. Michael Chandler,
Director of Education - Plan Virginia*

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

The City of Fairfax has demonstrated a commitment to thoughtful and coordinated development through its strong history in comprehensive planning. Despite being a relatively young jurisdiction (in 2011, the City is celebrating fifty years of being chartered as an independent city), six comprehensive plans have been adopted in the City's history. The first plan was adopted in 1968, with others to follow in 1975, 1982, 1988, 1997, and 2004 (resulting in a new plan being adopted in the City every six to nine years since 1968). In addition to these plans, the City adopted a number of amendments in the intervening years.

The plans have reflected issues of importance of the time, but all have: reflected an appreciation of the City's history, acknowledged the importance of the City's character and quality of life, and identified the City's central role in Northern Virginia.



1968

- ⇒ Land use, community facilities, and transportation are primary components of the plan
- ⇒ Land uses consist of residential, commercial, and industrial only
- ⇒ Loop road proposed around Old Town Fairfax in a series of six stages
- ⇒ Multifamily development proposed around the Old Town Fairfax area



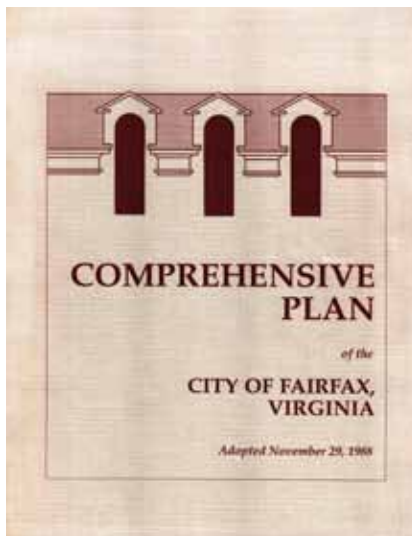
1975

- ⇒ Limits the expansion of commercial development and supports conversion of vacant commercial lands back to residential or planned mixed uses
- ⇒ Sixteen relatively large and underutilized sites specifically are targeted for action (reconcile land use and zoning)
- ⇒ Supports building and/or designating bypass roads around the City to divert pass through traffic (I-66, Blake Lane, and Braddock Road)
- ⇒ Anticipates the opening of the Vienna Metro station and its impacts



1982

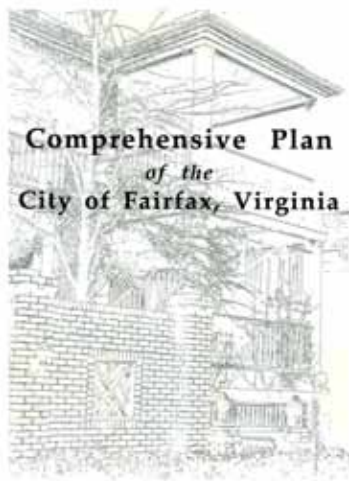
- ⇒ Recognizes the impact of development projects in Fairfax County will have on the office market in the City, including the development of the Fairfax County Government Center.
- ⇒ Anticipates the completion of I-66 and Metro
- ⇒ Considers the impacts of growth at George Mason University
- ⇒ Supports maintaining a balance of commercial and residential development
- ⇒ Supports building and/or designating bypass roads around the City to divert pass through traffic (Shirley Gate Road extension and I-66/Route 50 interchange)
- ⇒ Encourages varied type and cost of housing
- ⇒ Emphasizes energy use and pollution



1988

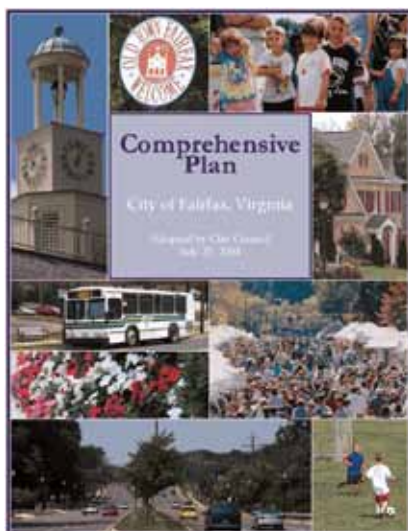
- ⇒ Recommends improving the appearance of the City, particularly the aging commercial corridors
- ⇒ Encourages larger single family or “move up” type housing
- ⇒ Supports a north-south bypass route around City (Braddock Road to Shirley Gate Road to Waples Mill Road to Oakton Road to Blake Lane)
- ⇒ Explains land use categories in greater detail and identifies areas for specific uses
- ⇒ Focuses on Old Town Fairfax

1997



- ⇒ Recognizes the notable position of Central Fairfax (Fair Oaks area and City of Fairfax) in the regional economy
- ⇒ Proposes strategies to address housing supply, affordability, and type
- ⇒ Suggests traffic calming techniques in residential neighborhoods
- ⇒ Recommends redevelopment along the Lee Highway (today's Fairfax Boulevard) corridor and at primary nodes
- ⇒ Identifies Southfax near the border with Fairfax County and George Mason University (Chain Bridge Road and School Street area) for mixed-use activity and transitional uses
- ⇒ Emphasizes clean water and includes the Chesapeake Bay Preservation program in appendix

2004



- ⇒ Redevelopment potential for Fairfax Boulevard further defined around nodes (Kamp Washington, Northfax, and Fairfax Circle) and connectors (a west connector between Kamp Washington and Northfax and an east connector between Northfax and Fairfax Circle)
- ⇒ Provides specific recommendations for uses and character of development within and around Old Town Fairfax
- ⇒ Considers the expansion of Metro to the west and its impacts
- ⇒ Focuses on improving public facilities and park land/open space, in particular
- ⇒ Strategies for enhancing arts and culture are included

Through regular update of its plan, the City of Fairfax has assured that it remains relevant and useful. Regular updates have also ensured that departments and agencies outside of Community Development and Planning are aware of the plan and incorporate it into their work programs. While a number of implementation measures have been utilized through the years, the descriptions below of the Capital Improvement Program, land use and zoning, and specific plans and programs provide greater detail on three of the most frequently used.

Capital Improvement Program


The Capital Improvement Program (CIP), which outlines the five-year plan for physical improvements in the City, serves as the key implementation mechanism for any City-sponsored construction envisioned in the Comprehensive Plan. The first year of the CIP is adopted with the City's annual general and special fund budgets. The four "out years" of the plan serve as a guide for future budgeting and debt forecasting. The City's CIP is organized around functionally around the major categories of capital spending: education, general government, recreation and community appearance, environment, and transportation.

"A local planning commission may, and at the direction of the governing body shall, prepare and revise annually a capital improvement program based on the comprehensive plan of the locality for a period not to exceed the ensuing five years. ...The capital improvement program shall include the commission's recommendations, and estimates of cost of the facilities, including any road improvement and any transportation improvement the locality chooses to include in its capital improvement plan and as provided for in the comprehensive plan..."

Code of Virginia § 15.2-2239

The City of Fairfax uses the Comprehensive Plan as its baseline for budget decision-making. City Council's financial policies, established in 2000 and updated in 2008, state, "The City's annual operating budget, capital budget and Capital Improvement Program (CIP) shall be coordinated with, and shall be in concert with, the City's Comprehensive Plan." Accordingly, as project summaries are prepared by the submitting department, staff must indicate within which section of the Comprehensive Plan the project relates. (see example project summary page to the bottom left).

FY 2012 Adopted Budget - City of Fairfax, Virginia

PROJECT INFORMATION			
Project Name: CITYWIDE CROSSWALK RECOATING			
Comprehensive Plan Element			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public Service and Facilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Environment		
<input type="checkbox"/> Economy	<input type="checkbox"/> Housing		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community Appearance	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation		
<input type="checkbox"/> Land Use	<input type="checkbox"/> Other City Plan/Policy		
Statement of Need: This project provides for resurfacing of the 31 brick pattern crosswalks (6 crosswalks per year) throughout the city. Due to the high volume of traffic, this project will ensure that the crosswalks stay visible and safe for pedestrians.	Picture: 		

The project summaries are considered as a group and prioritized by a budget committee, that considers a number of factors, including the relationship of the project to Comprehensive Plan implementation. An initial CIP proposal is then presented to the Planning Commission, which conducts a public hearing and submits recommendations to City Council. City Council also holds a public hearing on the CIP and generally adopts the CIP in conjunction with the operating budget.

Over the years, the City of Fairfax has implemented numerous Comprehensive Plan-recommended projects through the CIP that range from land acquisition to streetscape improvements. An overview of the accomplishments that the City has achieved since the adoption of the

Comprehensive Plan in 2004, which includes a number of recent CIP projects, is available through the Department of Community Development and Planning.

Land Use and Zoning

The City of Fairfax Comprehensive Plan contains a series of recommendations related to land use and zoning in the Implementation chapter as well as in the Land Use Chapter and Land Use Plan. The guidance provided in the Land Use Plan and corresponding map (shown below) is likely the most heavily used section of the document. City staff, developers, and property owners reference this section regularly as it guides the future development of every property within the City. While the Land Use and Zoning briefing paper will address the specifics as they relate to Fairfax, it is important to note that these elements are critical components of the City's plan.

Specific Plans and Programs

The City of Fairfax has used area and functional planning to both supplement and implement the Comprehensive Plan. As is noted in the Background section, comprehensive plans are general in nature; therefore, it is sometimes necessary to conduct additional more detailed planning activities at either the area or function level. Area planning allows for the exploration of issues that may be unique to the particular location within the City, such as Old Town

Fairfax or Fairfax Boulevard. Functional plans delve into a particular aspect of the City, such as transportation or the environment. The City's Transit Development Plan and Old Lee Highway Transportation Study are examples of functional plans. Area and functional plans build upon the Comprehensive Plan and serve to implement it.

BEST PRACTICES

While all jurisdictions within the Commonwealth of Virginia are required to adopt a comprehensive plan and most contain very similar types of information, there exists broad variety in how the plans are developed and presented. This variety is undoubtedly related to the individual preferences and practices of each jurisdiction, but is also reflective of the increasing accessibility of technology. Technology, particularly as it has been applied to the communication process and the visualization methods in comprehensive planning, provides localities with numerous options to exchange and display information. Examples of how technology has been deployed can be informative as a locality examines how it will best utilize available resources.

Innovative use of technology is the only best practice examined in this briefing paper, but it is important to note that there are numerous best practices related to comprehensive planning that will be examined in other briefing papers.



Communication

As is mentioned in the *Planning process* section of this paper, the process by which a comprehensive plan is developed could be considered to be nearly as important as the document itself. The process validates the plan and communication is central to the process, so the importance of having an effective communication strategy cannot be understated.

One aspect of communication as it relates to the planning process is that which is geared toward public

outreach. The manner in which the public is engaged should be implemented with the intent of providing the highest likelihood of participation. Depending on the situation, it may be necessary to use “low tech” tools (mailers, posters or banners, advertisements, etc.) or it may be possible to use technology to reach the public.

With the far-reaching nature of technology today, it is usually possible to deploy at least some “high tech” measures as part of an outreach strategy, and most jurisdictions appear to be using both “high tech” and “low tech.” Some recent examples of using technology for public outreach include:

Blog

The Town of Blacksburg, Virginia used a blog, visible to the public, to post the plan revision recommendations of its comprehensive plan task force members



Social media

The City of Salem, Virginia used a social media outlet to announce meetings and keep the public informed on the progress of its comprehensive plan



Streaming video

The City of Chesapeake, Virginia used streaming video on its web page to inform citizens of the purpose and contents of a comprehensive plan



Another aspect of communication as it relates to the planning process is that which provides for direct public participation. While public participation at one time required direct contact, the use of technology allows interested individuals to become involved in a

planning process without attending a meeting or event. Technology can also enhance public participation at meetings and events by making it easier for all attendees to be personally involved. Some recent examples of using technology for public participation include:

Web-based questionnaire

The City of Danville, Virginia used an online questionnaire to solicit feedback on development, transportation, and vision for the future



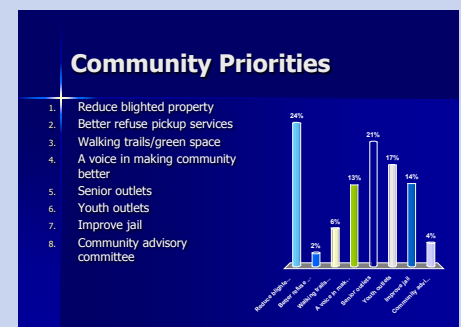
Visual preference survey

Roanoke County, Virginia used an online visual preference survey to solicit feedback on types of development in one of its communities



Real-time polling

The City of Richmond, Virginia used real-time electronic polling during a meeting to instantly post participant feedback



Visualization

A comprehensive plan relies heavily on both text and graphics to convey its content. Traditionally, graphics in a comprehensive plan have consisted of charts, photographs, maps, and hand-drawn images. With the availability of mapping and graphic software increasing in recent years, the complexity of graphic presentations in

comprehensive plans has dramatically improved. These new visualization techniques allow the plans to present information in a manner that can be easily understood. Importantly, these techniques can also provide for additional analysis to support decision-making. Some of the visualization techniques of today include:

3-D Rendering

The City of Winchester, Virginia used electronic rendering software to create a three-dimensional model of proposed development along a primary corridor. Access on the web allowed viewers to “fly through” the corridor



Digitally Enhanced Photography

The City of Fairfax, Virginia used digitally enhanced photography to depict potential changes to the Fairfax Boulevard corridor (“before and after” images)



Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Henrico County, Virginia used GIS mapping to analyze development potential and clearly present the information to readers of the comprehensive plan



Ultimately, the appropriate level of reliance on technology should be assessed against the value it provides to the comprehensive plan itself and the utility it provides to the participants in the planning process.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

An adopted comprehensive plan is a requirement for all localities in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Code of Virginia requires that certain items be contained within a comprehensive plan and requires basic public hearings and notifications prior to adoption, but a great deal of flexibility is provided to localities to go beyond the minimum requirements in the Code. The content of a plan and the process by which the plan is developed is largely left up to the locality to decide and should reflect local preferences and practices.

The information contained within this paper, and the techniques highlighted in the *Best Practices* section in particular, demonstrate that while much is left to the discretion of the individual locality, great importance is placed upon developing a plan that reflects the values of the community. The Code of Virginia tasks the local planning commission with preparing the plan and many of

those around the state have chosen to involve the public throughout the process of the developing the plan through the use of technology and through more traditional (or “low tech”) means of engagement. Importance has been placed upon direct public participation (as opposed to more passive forms of outreach) as the document itself will be viewed over time as the locality’s primary mechanism to balance the public interest and the rights of private property owners. The process to create a comprehensive plan (one that considers all of the alternatives) is often the best opportunity for the public to have meaningful impact on development in the community as well as to demonstrate support for projects undertaken for a public purpose. The efficiencies created by upfront public involvement that results in very clear expectations for both the public and private sectors are generally cited as the tangible benefits for taking a deliberate and measured approach toward comprehensive planning.

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